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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: PRESIDENT OBASANJO SUPPORTS CODE OF CONDUCT, PLEDGES TO FUND INEC

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During a November 20 meeting with USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios and Ambassador Jeter, President Obasanjo endorsed an all-parties Code of Conduct and promised to honor INEC's 27 billion Naira (USD 210 million) 2003 elections funding request. Obasanjo expressed confidence that electoral violence would be contained. He downplayed criticism of the voter registration exercise but stated that he would press INEC to quicken logistical preparations for the elections. Throughout the meeting both Natsios and Jeter stressed the importance of free, fair and peaceful elections not only for Nigeria but also for Africa and initiatives like NEPAD. Obasanjo pledged to do his utmost to ensure that the elections would be credible. End Summary.

OBASANJO SAYS VIOLENCE WILL NOT DERAIL ELECTIONS

12. (C) After a quick overview of AID's programs and presence, Administrator Natsios told President Obasanjo that, while President Bush wanted to visit Nigeria, it would be difficult to do so if there were widespread violence associated with upcoming elections. The Administrator stressed that President Bush had explicitly asked him to relay these concerns to his friend President Obasanjo. Obasanjo quipped that much of the tension and uncertainty was generated by people preoccupied about whether he would "come or go". More seriously, he admitted being "a little bit concerned" about electoral violence but believed "prospects were good" for containing it. Obasanjo indicated government efforts to minimize violence were beginning to bear fruit. To stem violence, the security forces must have the clear mandate that all violators should be arrested and none is above the law, he posited. Obasanjo recalled police hesitation at arresting a PDP senator who was caught interfering with voter registration. When the police explained they feared arresting an elected member of the ruling party, Obasanjo told them the senator should have been among the first arrested in order to send a public message that no one was above the law. (Comment: Obasanjo's account is reassuring but also self-serving. We have not seen reports of a PDP senator arrested for interference with the voter registration. End Comment.)

13. (C) Obasanjo identified the Southeastern region and Plateau State as troubled areas where he has conferred with the affected governors about quashing electoral violence. In conjunction with the Anambra and Abia states, the federal government has crack-downed on the vigilante Bakassi Boys in those two states. Obasanjo pointed to Enugu State as the most complex problem in the Southeast. A few advisors close to the Governor have been implicated in violence. Governor Nnamani had sworn noninvolvement; however, it was apparent that Obasanjo had second thoughts about the Governor's disavowal.

14. (C) Obasanjo predicted little violence in his ethnic home base, the Southwest. The region would not live up to its moniker as the "wild, wild West" as long as the rival parties, the AD and PDP talk as they should," he stated cryptically. (Comment: Obasanjo may have good reason to be sanguine about the Southwest. Apparently, he and the AD governors of the six Southwest states are close to an electoral modus

vivendi whereby the Governors will support Obasanjo's presidency if Obasanjo does not actively support the PDP gubernatorial candidates in those states during the general elections. Perhaps it was no coincidence that the AD National Chairman was in the waiting room when our group was leaving the Villa. End Comment.)

15. (C) When Administrator Natsios mentioned a Code of Conduct as the best mechanism to elicit public commitment to non-violence by all political parties, Obasanjo enthusiastically endorsed the idea and asked that we help Nigeria establish such a Code. Obasanjo continued that the National Assembly had recently rejected an electoral violence bill he had proposed. It was considered "too harsh" by those members who thought it could be used against them. The bill, he explained, provided that any elected official could be investigated for participation in electoral violence but would only be tried after leaving office. The measure also contained a provision for restitution by the wrongdoer to those harmed by his misconduct. Apparently undaunted by the Assembly's prior rejection, Obasanjo asserted that he would resubmit the bill. After Ambassador Jeter stressed the usefulness of all parties gathering to publicly renounce violence, Obasanjo nodded at the suggestion, saying he would get the parties to agree to such an event. (Comment: The impetus behind the violence bill was laudable but the measure was poorly written. Some lawmakers reasonably feared that overzealous security forces might abuse its overbroad language to stifle the political campaigns of non-office holders. End Comment)

INEC -- ELECTION PREPARATIONS AND FUNDING

16. (C) During the meeting Administrator Natsios repeatedly voiced concern about INEC logistical preparations for the elections. Time was getting short; INEC needed to quicken the pace of ordering essential material like ballot boxes and paper. Obasanjo replied that INEC could use the boxes from the 1999 contests. When Ambassador Jeter mentioned the current stock might be insufficient for next year's elections, Obasanjo seemed genuinely surprised. He stated he would talk to INEC Chairman Guobadia about its logistical planning.

17. (C) Obasanjo declared that funding INEC was "priority number one". Press reports were inaccurate that INEC requested 36 billion Naira (USD 275 million) in its supplemental budget. The INEC supplemental was 27 billion (7 billion Naira to pay for September voters registration exercise, 20 billion Naira for balloting material and 300 million for party registration). He instructed the Finance Minister to fund the request completely and immediately lest he be threatened with impeachment again, Obasanjo joked. He added that he also was intent to recover the 21 million Naira lost in a scandal regarding the INEC legal department that was discovered several months ago.

18. (C) Regarding voter registration, Obasanjo's did not seem to understand that many, if not most, Nigerians saw the exercise as flawed. Responding to Natsios's question, Obasanjo discounted claims of widespread under-registration and stated that those who were unable to register could submit a claim during the normal five day review period following the publication of the voters roll by INEC. Somewhat contradicting himself, however, he said that politicians bought and hoarded forms believing that they could stack the voter lists in their favor by having loyalists only complete the forms. Otherwise, he said, there was no reason for a shortage of forms.

19. (C) Obasanjo felt the security features in the computerization process of the forms would winnow the resultant multiple registrations out of the system. The President then described a demonstration of the thumbprint analysis that INEC was employing to detect multiple registrations. He was confident the computerized thumbprint analysis, conducted at each stage of tabulation from the ward to the national level, would detect multiple registrations by the same person. (Comment: Obasanjo's explanation that under-registration was not a major problem is unconvincing.

Politicians illegally hoarding forms could have precluded numbers of innocent, eligible voters from registering. His statements suggest the President has been paying more attention to catching fraudulent registrants than in remedying the inability of innocent citizens to register. Even there, however, his confidence in INEC's security features might be too high. End Comment)

10. (C) Natsios emphasized that the coming elections were not only important to Nigeria and the bilateral relationship, but also to Africa and to such continental initiatives like NEPAD. Western nations would view the quality of Nigerian elections as a barometer of commitment of Africa's largest nation to the good governance objectives of NEPAD. Meanwhile, other African countries would view the elections as a good or bad precedent to follow. Obasanjo cautioned that Washington must not view the process entirely through a Western optic. Understanding of Nigeria's background was important. For example, increased communal violence in the past years, ironically, was a by-product of democracy. Before 1999, the military brutally suppressed but did nothing to resolve underlying communal problems. The advent of democracy and its concomitant freedoms have allowed people to express themselves, sometimes violently. Obasanjo maintained the frequent communal violence in Plateau State was inevitable because tensions had been there for a long time but military suppression kept these fractures hidden. As a democratically elected leader, Obasanjo said that he could not employ the same tactics. Instead, at his urging, Plateau Governor Dariye was spending more time talking to the rival communities. The violence was slowly abating, Obasanjo claimed.

11. (C) Pointing to the Yoruba greeting practice of youth prostrating before elders as an example, Obasanjo contended important cultural differences would mark differences in democratic practices in Nigeria and the West. Natsios emphasized that the NEPAD good governance standards were not Western imports but were authored by Obasanjo and other African leaders. Visibly warming to this topic, Obasanjo cited the example of corruption as an abhorrent dysfunction that unfortunately had gotten a foothold in Nigeria's political economy. While corruption was not part of traditional culture, time would be needed to uproot it from the political system. Likewise, eliminating political violence would take time. In the interim, Nigeria would continue to build its democracy by keeping what is vital to its culture, discarding what is harmful, and borrowing what is good and relevant from the West, Obasanjo maintained.

12. (C) By campaigning on substantive issues and letting people freely criticize him, Obasanjo hoped to set a personal example in excising violence and promoting tolerance. In this regard, Obasanjo said he welcomed other contenders for the PDP presidential nomination. "The more the merrier," he asserted.

13. (C) Natsios mentioned that he and Secretary Powell had successfully fought for, and President Bush had approved, an unprecedented 25 percent increase in regular development assistance to Africa over and above funding from the Millennium Challenge Account. However, in Washington and throughout the Western donor community, there was skepticism about whether that money would be put to good use unless it were allocated to countries with demonstrated good performance. Nigeria could diminish the negativism by holding credible elections, Natsios said. Conversely bad elections would diminish those who had advocated increased assistance to Africa. Obasanjo acknowledged the point by stating that he knew political violence and the Shari'a adultery stoning sentences had put Nigeria in an ugly light. As the meeting concluded, both Natsios and Jeter reiterated the importance of Nigeria holding its first successful civilian-run elections. Obasanjo shook his head affirmatively, vowing to do all in his powers to do just that -- to conduct good elections.

FOND MEMORIES OF AID

14. (U) Obasanjo expressed deep appreciation for current USAID programs and assistance in Nigeria. He

also mentioned, with visible fondness, how USAID assistance had helped construct the "first comprehensive high school in Nigeria", located in Obasanjo's home state, Ogun. Down there, people see USAID as America, he told Natsios.

COMMENT

15. (C) The meeting was generally positive. Despite the phalanx of officials and politicians waiting to see him, Obasanjo was relaxed, engaging and generous with his time. Administrator Natsios was able to make our key points. By endorsing the Code of Conduct and pledging to fund INEC, Obasanjo took two of those three key points on board. On the third major point, his take on voter registration was disappointing; Obasanjo appeared not to fully appreciate the public's criticism of the exercise. However, remedying the gaps in voter registration lies in INEC's exclusive purview and its Chairman told Natsios that INEC would reopen voter registration in December or January 2003 (septel).

16. (C) While Obasanjo's statements were encouraging, we also know that stifling violence will be easier said than done. Obasanjo took the high road and seemed overly optimistic. The much of the violence in Kaduna that claimed hundreds of lives began the day of the meeting and the riots in Abuja took place only two days after.

17. (U) The Administrator cleared this message.
JETER